

Qualities that Exemplify Student Leadership



BY DONNA RICE

Literature about leadership is abundant—and yet a concise understanding of what leadership entails remains elusive. As with most aspects of highly effective people, effective leadership begins with the individual. Until a person is self-actualized, external relationships and communications are often unpredictable and potentially flawed. The paradox is that young people need exposure to situations that require them to lead, in order to develop individual skills that will enable them to be successful group and community leaders.

Effective student leaders step out and risk failure because they know failure and disappointment are a normal part of growth. They work hard to learn *about* leadership and welcome opportunities to hone their skills *for* leadership. As with learning a foreign language, success is gained not from the classroom instruction *about* language (though very important), but from learning *for* fluency through immersion. At first, new language students have a hard time expressing themselves and understanding what others are saying. They definitely mispronounce many of their words, which sometimes invokes others' laughter and their own embarrassment. Language learners are forced to take risks, exposing themselves to criti-

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▲ Mentoring, tutoring, and computer skills—
all a part of the JROTC program.



Students conducting a JROTC Leadership Training Exercise.

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cism, to progress to the point of fluency.

Students come to school from many directions. Their paths are often full of barriers to realizing their full potential. Sometimes they have been taught through poor examples exactly the opposite of the basic individual traits essential for good leadership. On the other hand, some arrive with highly developed ideals and at least moderate confidence levels. The question for instructional leaders is how to take each student from where he or she is to the next step—or better—to fluency (effective leadership) regardless of the starting point.

What Teachers Can Do to Foster Leadership

Leadership-enlightened teachers can help to develop leaders through classroom mentorship. They can delegate many classroom functions to include assigning group leaders and spokespersons, escorts and assistants. Public praise for a job well done and special recognition exemplifies the first rule of psychology—you get more of what you reinforce.

Project-based learning and journaling for reflection can bring out students' leadership qualities and provide new opportunities to lead. However, since their main purpose is to help students academically, the focus of classroom teachers must be

to help students learn the subject matter. To do that well, teachers need to find out what their students already know, because new information is best assimilated by relating it to existing knowledge and experience. If that experience is limited, teachers must create scenarios or relate stories to create the foundational understanding.

Likewise, to help students develop leadership qualities, teachers need to know who those students are and where they are at. Often, the limited interaction in academic classes does not allow teachers to find out as much as they would like to about their students, and what teachers do see is what is presented and not always what is actually inside.

The Role of Administrators in Student Leadership Development

In order to ensure students not only learn content, but also develop character, school leaders need to provide a program of instruction that includes leadership education. The leadership program needs to include assessments and opportunities to get to know students and for students to learn about leadership and themselves. To the extent privacy laws allow, that information needs to be shared with all teachers and administrators so that the entire school becomes an establishment for not only learning con-

tent, but also for developing character.

Instructional leaders must foster a climate of collegiality to ensure all administrators and faculty members are working together to achieve the best outcome for each student. They need to guarantee students are able to take leadership classes by structuring those classes as required electives, or allowing them to substitute for requisite credits for graduation (e.g., physical education, health, civics, practical arts, personal finance, or some other non-core course in which standards are met through the leadership program).

It is disheartening that every student does not have the opportunity to participate in a program because increased requirements for graduation have not left room for leadership in their schedules. Especially sad is the fact that students who have to be in remedial classes at the expense of good leadership programs may be missing just the spark and support they need to achieve. The bottom line is that state and school administrators need to work to remove barriers so that all students can participate in leadership programs.

Successful Programs and How They Develop Leaders

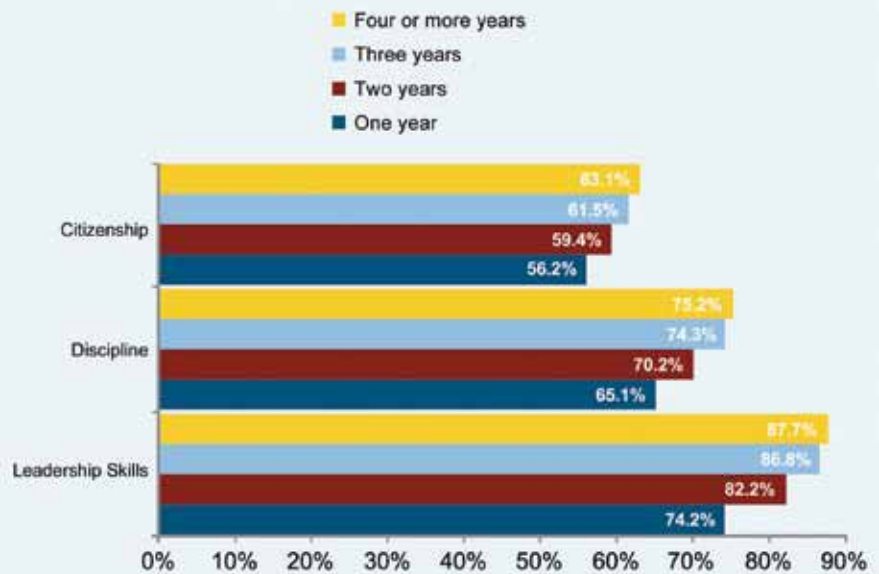
Successful school leadership programs must be structured for students to learn



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

The JROTC Color Guard in action.

Skills Developed by JROTC Participation by Tenure



GRAPHIC COURTESY OF COLLEGE OPTIONS FOUNDATION

Edited table from the National Research Center for College and University Admissions survey, College Options Foundation.

about leadership and *for* leadership. Essential ingredients for learning *about* leadership include curricula with differentiated lessons, which help all students to be successful. Effective student leadership programs that teach leadership, and are present in schools today, include (but are not limited to):

- DECA: An Association of Marketing Students;
- FBLA: Future Business Leaders of America;
- FCCLA: Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America;
- FFA;
- SkillsUSA;
- TSA: Technology Students of America.
- JROTC: Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps

All of the above programs are structured for student leadership success as well as academic achievement. They include dynamic, student-centered lessons on leadership, careers, traditions, responsibility, management, personal finance, character development, written and oral

communications, health and wellness, physical fitness, community service, life skills (goal-setting, decision-making, problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, test-taking, etc.). The list (with its sub-categories) continues.

The reason the programs work so well is not only that they teach the success skills mentioned above, but that they also teach *for* leadership by providing laboratories and for students to practice those skills. These programs are structured to foster camaraderie, a sense of belonging, and many opportunities for service and leadership. They publish mission and vision statements and creeds that serve to provide a bond and sense of direction. Awards, scholarships, conferences, and competitions sponsored by national offices and other organizations provide motivation and opportunities for achievement at all levels. Many programs have uniforms where students can wear their accomplishments proudly on their shirts, hats, belts or jackets.

The programs include students from all grades, including those in middle school. This feature provides long-term intervention over time to keep students

on a positive track, as well as opportunities for mentoring and tutoring within the program. Students at all levels find purpose and are challenged to grow academically, personally and socially.

In the 25 years I worked with The Army JROTC Program, I had the pleasure of meeting many of the leaders from other student leadership organizations. I am moved by their dedication and enthusiasm for ensuring a better nation through the development of young people. As long as people of their character are at the helm, our country will continue to be strong.

I am saddened that not every school supports one or more student leadership program. All students can thrive provided they have access to leadership instruction, an environment in which they are motivated to achieve and allowed to fail, and a structure for them to practice their leadership skills.

What JROTC is doing to Foster Leadership

JROTC is a citizenship, leadership and character education program known to provide that spark to succeed. All services

(Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps), which support approximately 3,500 units, nearly 8,000 instructors, and 500,000 cadets, successfully build better leaders for America. The formula for that success as simply stated as possible is (a) an organizational and individual mission, vision and plan complete with an assessment, evaluation and recognition system; (b) an environment that fosters a sense of belonging coupled with tradition and the challenge to step up; (c) a 21st century curriculum that supports core subjects and teaches *about* leadership; (d) the opportunity for leadership through immersion—the structure of the program that provides graduated positions of leadership, opportunities for community service, a robust variety of extracurricular activities, and local, regional and national competitions; and (e) the example, expertise and dedication of its instructors—retired Officers and Non-commissioned Officers who want to give back. In addition to all of the above, each service brings its own identity and unique opportunities.

In all programs, new cadets immediately understand that they must practice good followership, memorize a creed, participate in team-building activities, wear a common uniform, march in step, achieve academically and ascribe to common values. Mistakes are considered as learning tools, and failure is a part of the process. Positive school behavior, academic progress and attendance in school, coupled with the many JROTC leadership opportunities under the watchful eyes of their instructors foster leadership growth. Even first-year cadets report leadership development, which continues to grow throughout the program

Maintaining the Magic

The magic of JROTC is that when provided with an environment for growth, students of all abilities and disabilities thrive together. They all benefit significantly from being a member of a values-

based program, with winners and “not yet winners” in the membership. Through that relationship and a place where they are safe to learn, practice and fail, they can become highly effective leaders. **T**

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